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Living the long-term consequences of Thai-Western marriage migration: the radical life-course transformations of women who partner older Westerners

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how relationships between Thai women and older Western men transform over the long-term, from a woman's perspective. We present a model that identifies stages in the life-cycle or 'narrative arc' of a long-term partnership. This framework allows us to study how negotiated exchanges (material, emotional) between the couple evolve in 'stages' over time, and the degree to which a woman is empowered from her initial position of relative subservient dependency. We examine three factors that shape her relative autonomy in a partnership in ways that can result in greater security, wellbeing, and status. First, increasing access to individual formal rights (primarily through marriage) can lead to relative financial independence and security. Second, differential ageing in a couple can shift the balance of dependency as he becomes relatively infirm. Third, her changing obligations to natal family members, balanced with caring for her partner, can importantly shape her wellbeing. The study is based on 20 biographical interviews with women in partnerships for 7–30 years. We find that almost every aspect of a woman's life transforms radically. Most consider it a worthwhile life-strategy, but many suffer hidden psychological costs as a result of living this 'unintended transnationalism' over the long-term.

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Introduction

Over the last decades research has flourished on cross-border marriages between women from poor regions in Asia and men from wealthier countries.¹ Thailand is an important case, as a destination for Western male migrants seeking sex, girlfriends, wives, and carers, and as an exporter of women to wealthier countries (Cohen 2001; Plambech 2008; Angeles and Sunanta 2009; Aoyama 2009; Tosakul 2010; Jongwilaiwan and Thomson 2013; Sunanta and Angeles 2013; Statham forthcoming). The decline of the agrarian economy, during Thailand's economic boom and bust, has importantly transformed rural women's lives (Mills 2003; Keyes 2014). In addition, cultural norms and values within Thai national identity and Buddhism prominently shape gender relations

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and women's perceived obligations and roles in society (Van Esterik 2000; Jeffrey 2002). A key element is the tradition of 'dutiful daughters', whereby women are culturally expected to bear the care and financial burdens of supporting their parents and natal family (Angeles and Sunanta 2009). This familial 'duty' increasingly occurs in a context of rural agrarian impoverishment, where women face diminishing opportunities to provide. At the same time, the dream of leaving these problems behind and joining the Bangkok consumer society is an increasing desire and motivation, especially for younger generations. This gives rise to an increasing number of women partnering with foreigners and a situation where: 'Marriage to a foreigner has become an imaginable, culturally scripted aspiration and route out of poverty' (Jongwilaiwan and Thomson 2013, 370). The scale of Thai-Westerner partnerships and families dependent on them, is so significant that it is transforming the social structure of many villages in rural regions, as well as changing women's aspirations for achieving social mobility.

Today, some partnerships between Thai women and Westerners have lasted for more than a quarter of a century. Early pioneers acted as intermediaries and facilitated more partnerships by introducing friends and kin from across national borders and showing them the ropes. In this way, cross-border partnerships have produced specific migration streams, that have grown significantly over time and importantly transformed the social fabric of the transnational localities and 'linked lives' that they have produced. While much research focuses on the 'getting together' phase through commodified encounters via the sex industry or internet-dating, there is surprisingly little on how this type of partnership 'works', or not, for a woman over many years. This gap matters. It is important to recognise that lives are built over the long duration and significant transitions and transformations take place over a life-course. The conditions and aspirations that brought a woman into a partnership with a Westerner will be significantly different than those that shape her life opportunities after living for a decade in that relationship. She and he will have aged, differentially, in their respective life courses. She may have experienced living and working abroad or become a citizen of a Western state. They may have children. She may own property. He may have retired, gone bankrupt, or become ill. It is important to trace how a partnership transforms over time because it shapes the life opportunities of the two individuals in a mutually interdependent way that is socially embedded. The transformative impact on women's lives and rural societies is captured by the brilliant documentary films co-directed by anthropologist Sine Plambech.²

In this contribution, we aim to advance understanding on how a woman's life-chances and aspirations can transform over the course of a long-term partnership with a Westerner.³ Specifically, we examine the distinct stages in the life-cycle or 'narrative arc' of a relationship as it advances over years, by looking at how the balance of intimate and material exchanges between the couple transforms. We consider how three factors combine to shape the partnership over time in ways that impact on her relative autonomy, empowerment and aspirations as an individual: first, her access to formal rights, primarily through legal marriage; second, differential ageing in the couple, i.e. that he becomes more dependent on her for care provision as he ages and becomes 'old(er)'; and third, pressures placed on her as a 'dutiful daughter' to support her natal family with resources from her partnership. Finally, we try to give voice to women's perceptions of their experienced outcomes, in particular with regard to social mobility, when they look back over their life experiences and evaluate their search for a better life through partnering a Westerner.

All things considered, in what ways materially, emotionally, and in wellbeing, has it improved her life? Has it enhanced her 'status' in her relations to her own family, and in how she fits into Thai society?

Our research questions are:

1. *How does the 'narrative arc' of a partnership evolve in 'stages' over the long-term? What negotiated exchanges (material/intimate) between the partners define their relations at each 'stage'?*
2. *What factors (access to rights, ageing, family obligations) transform the exchanges between partners over time? How can this change their (gendered) roles and shift the relative power balance between them?*
3. *How do women perceive the 'outcomes' of living in a long-term partnership? Overall, has it improved her life (wealth, security, wellbeing, status)?*

We think that a woman's perspective deserves special attention. First, it matters to see how individuals who start from a relatively weaker and dependent position in a partnership, materially, in status, in access to rights, try to be agents and transform their life situations by partnering with a significantly older man, who they do not know well, from another culture and continent. Second, although popular media accounts often depict these as peculiar sexualised encounters, partnering a Westerner is increasingly a culturally normal strategy for a woman. Third, Thai-Westerner partnerships increasingly exhibit a wide range of forms as social relationships, that are not captured by the resonant stigmatising stereotypes, implying she is a 'kept woman' or prostitute, in Thailand and the West. Last, it is important to note that these women experience a specific form of 'transnational life' over many years. Intercultural living with a foreigner is a by-product of her aim to secure a better life by initiating a partnership. It was seldom a motivation in the first place. In this sense, a woman's new everyday life experiences with a Westerner exhibit what we call 'unintended transnationalism'. Over the long *durée*, women often perceive the challenges of living with a Westerner as a series of unintended outcomes of an initial decision made some years ago. At the same time, she faces very high contextual barriers and social costs, if she wants to 'exit'. Living this form of 'unintended transnationalism' can be an important source of existential psychological stressors for an individual, which accumulate over years. It is therefore important to evaluate long-term 'outcomes' for women, not only by their relative wealth, but also socially, and by their perceptions of emotional wellbeing, and where they fit into society after taking this journey.

Our original data is from twenty deep biographical semi-structured interviews with women who have been in partnerships with 'Western' men from Europe, Australia or North America, for between seven (minimum requirement for inclusion) and thirty years, and on average fourteen years (mean 13.7). The sample is obviously biased because it includes only relationships that have endured, and not the many that fail before seven years. However, it is precisely the long-term relationships that enable us to reconstruct a woman's exchanges with her partner, their transformations over time, and how she thinks this has impacted on her life-chances. Our sample exhibits a broad range of life experiences and 'outcomes'. Also, we interviewed women who currently reside primarily in Thailand, because we wanted to assess 'outcomes' relative to status in Thai society. Nonetheless, the sample includes women who have lived many years

abroad, who move backwards and forwards within a year, who plan to re-emigrate abroad imminently, and those who never left permanently, but made significant international visits abroad. It needs emphasising that high mobility, internal in Thailand and international, is strongly embedded in the biographies of women in our sample. High mobility and (internal and international) migration is a very common characteristic of families living in Thai rural regions, as a strategy to support income across the extended family network (Turner and Michaud 2018). Marriage migration is an important component of this intergenerational strategy to sustain families in the agrarian sector.

In the next sections, we make a theoretical contribution by discussing how access to rights, differential ageing, and family pressures can shape a woman's prospects, then present an analytic framework for 'stages' in the 'narrative arc' of a long-term partnership. Subsequently, we provide methodological details, before undertaking an analysis of six distinct 'stages' of a partnership, how the factors transform their exchanges, and her experienced outcomes. Given our emphasis on the long-term, we consciously focus on the later 'stages'. This provides more space to demonstrate the factors that change her life-chances. Finally, we draw the findings together, and consider how partnering a Westerner can shape a woman's life-trajectory, for good and bad.

Building long-term partnerships: negotiated exchanges and transformative factors

One influential general theoretical perspective by Constable (2005b, 2009) discusses 'global marriage-scapes', whereby the spatial distribution of cross-border marriages is structured by inequalities of gender, nationality, ethnicity and class, between the individual partners, and between their respective nation-states. Obviously, there is a very clear structured power imbalance in the exchanges of a Thai-Western 'marriage-scape': men can draw on significant resources of wealth, as well as their national and male imaginaries of superiority, relative to women from poor backgrounds. A Western man's desire for a 'Thai wife' is driven by imaginaries of Asian women as hyper-feminine, exotic, sexual, submissive, docile and willing to provide intimate and care services (Cohen 2001; Hill Maher and Lafferty 2014). Although patriarchal racial stereotypes, these constructions are 'social facts' that often shape the behaviour of men seeking Thai women and how they treat them.⁴

A core idea of marriage migration is that negotiated exchanges between the partners define the form of their social relationship. This is established by a generation of largely female scholars, whose empirical cases flesh out specific forms of exchanges that define a cross-border marriage.⁵ This research has advanced understanding in a number of ways. Women are no longer depicted as desperate 'victims', but subjects who exercise a degree of agency, albeit within contexts of high structural constraints (Mix and Piper 2003). Researchers demonstrate heterogeneity of desires, motives and experiences that shape a woman's decision to embark on this journey (Mohanty 2003). Today a woman's subjective 'desire', emotional aspirations and cultural values are commonly included as constitutive of her decisions to marry and move, alongside economic motivations (Kim 2018). Importantly, this emphasises a woman's agency in taking decisions even in partnerships where she faces a significant embedded power imbalance relative to the man. Last, research on women in the household, the primary unit associated

with reproductive labour, sees the provision of intimate relations as a form of ‘commodity’ (Constable 2009). This focus on the ‘commodification’ of the intimacy and care-giving provided by women has brought to light the blurred lines between domestic work, care-giving, and sex work. It highlights that negotiated exchanges between women and men that occur in their everyday life are intimate and emotional, but also ‘commodified’ material and financial exchanges.

A specifically relevant case study of negotiated exchanges in a partnership is Jongwilaiwan and Thomson’s (2013: 364) study of Thai migrant wives, who live in a highly dependent and subordinate position relative to their Singaporean husbands:

a patriarchal bargain also implies a negotiated exchange between individuals. In this case, the patriarchal bargain connotes submission on the part of a woman to a man (particularly with regard to rights over her reproductive capacity and sexuality, but more generally to his authority) in exchange for protection, subsistence, goods, surplus material wealth or some other extrinsic resources.

Similarly, in the first instance we expect the exchanges for a woman starting out with a Westerner to be based on her provision of intimate services (sex, domestic work, care), and prestige, status and ‘romance’ to him, in exchange for access to material goods and money. However, we study how these exchanges evolve in ‘stages’ over the long-term, and potentially allow her to emerge from a relatively dependent and subservient position. What forms of exchanges shape and transform a partnership? Is there abuse or exploitation, does she perceive it as a ‘job’, or can companionship or ‘love’ emerge?

Turning to explanatory factors that can influence the relative power of a woman in her relationship, we refer to rights, ageing and family pressures. First, her relative *access to formal rights* matters. Given the central role, following T. H. Marshall (1950), attributed to access to formal legal-civic and social rights in empowering individual migrants in their societies of settlement (e.g. Brubaker 1992; Koopmans et al. 2005), and transnationally (e.g. Waldinger 2015), it is surprising that such discussions are much less present in cross-border marriage perspectives.⁶ However, access to rights from receiving and sending states matter a great deal in shaping how each partner decides to proceed in a partnership. For example, restrictive immigration, visa and residence requirements in Thailand for foreigners, but even more so in Western states for Thais, means that couples usually need to legally ‘marry’ to move around and live together over sustained periods of time. In this way, a woman can gain access to rights that are potentially empowering. As a legal wife who has married and lived abroad with her husband, a woman gains individual rights for international mobility, work and residence abroad, and, as a spouse, potentially access to long-term social welfare, pension, and health rights. If a woman naturalises to her husband’s homeland country, she gains access to full individual citizenship rights and protections of a Western state. Alternatively, if they register their marriage in Thailand, he gains access to rights for a long-term visa, residence, property, and owning a business, sometimes access to state medical provision, but she gains some degree of legal ownership over their capital and properties in Thailand. This holds even if they divorce, and if he dies, she has inheritance rights. However, formal rights only empower women, if they are actually realised. But there are increasingly communication networks on social media, where women married to Westerners share information about how to enforce rights, for example, in response to domestic violence.⁷

A second transformative factor is *differential ageing*. This insight draws from an increasing recognition in migration literature that an individual's stage in the life-course, understood as 'an age graded sequence of socially defined roles and events that are enacted over historical time and place' (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003, 15), importantly shapes aspirations and decisions to move across places and social space (e.g. Bailey 2009; Findlay et al. 2015). Western men are typically about fifteen years older than their wives, and initiate partnerships when they are fifty years old.⁸ As the years advance, the partners enter distinct stages of their individual life courses, together, but in ways that change the relationship between them. Large age differences can shape decisions in the partnership, such as whether to try and have children. However, the most significant outcome is that as he ages, and his mental and physical health deteriorates, their relationship shifts to one where the intimate services she provides move decisively towards providing eldercare. Their interpersonal relations and emotional bonds will change as they experience a transformation of intimacy in their negotiated exchanges. A woman who has been subservient and dominated can experience this as an increase in autonomy and independence, as he is increasingly dependent and frail, and no longer able to exert social control. However, his relative loss of efficacy as an elder may also lead to increased healthcare costs, and a decrease in household income, meaning that she has to deal with financial difficulties.

A third factor transformative factor is her changing set of *obligations to natal family* members. This insight again derives from life-course studies, and the so-called 'linked lives' perspective in migration studies, which examines how individual relationships within a family can lead to decisions to migrate (e.g. Bailey and Boyle 2004; Findlay et al. 2015). For us, the relevant focus is the role that *significant others*, either from a woman's household, or from her extended family kinship networks (e.g. Kou, Mulder, and Bailey 2017), play in influencing her decisions in a transnational partnership over time. While her Western partner is her most 'significant other', we refer explicitly to her relationships with her Thai family and children, as sources for her motivations and aspirations. For example, does a woman face pressures from her extended family to be a 'dutiful daughter' and support her ageing parents, materially, through remittances, or for unanticipated emergency healthcare needs? Does she have obligations to support children from her previous marriage, for their education or emotional needs? Such factors often drive her decision to partner with a Westerner in the first place. This pressure to provide importantly influences how she addresses her partner, with some men unwilling to support extended Thai families, while others are willing to pay the costs to become a 'son' to her parents (Thompson et al. 2016). However, the relative burden of family pressures can change as the years advance. If her parents die, she may no longer need to support them and that might increase her individual income and autonomy. Alternatively, family social pressures and demands may increase the longer she is in a partnership, especially when she is (perhaps wrongly) perceived to have access to significant resources and wealth. Her family may become dependent and unproductive. She often sits in the unenviable position of mediating competing demands between her partner and her family, and this can be a source of significant psychological and emotional stress.

A Fourth literature to draw from refers not to transformative factors, but to perceived 'outcomes', in particular with regard to social mobility. How and by what criteria do we assess whether partnering a Westerner leads to better life-chances and enhanced status in Thai society? Drawing from classic 'status exchange' theory (Merton 1941), where low status

groups in a society seek to marry up to gain access to higher socio-economic resources, marriage migration literature usually frames this discussion in terms of *hypergamy*: whether marriage results in social mobility, i.e. 'moving up' or 'moving down' in economic and status terms. Today 'outcomes' are no longer simplistically equated with economic gain, but refer also to emotional and social wellbeing. For example, Oxfeld's (2005) study of the transnational Hakka community problematises the idea of 'marrying up', by demonstrating a complex array of social and interpersonal factors that shape perceptions of 'gain' from a relationship. For a woman who partners a Westerner, the issue of 'status exchange' in Thai society is complicated, because although she may achieve some degree of wealth, a house, or car, this is to some degree counterbalanced by the stigma of being a 'Mia Farang'. On the other hand, if she is able to be a source of resources for others, by providing knowledge and brokering skills for those wishing to partner, or by lending money, then her status can be enhanced.

Reconstructing a 'narrative arc' for Thai-Westerner partnerships: analytic framework

To study the potential life-cycle of a long-term partnership, we draw on the 'narrative arc' concept from cognitive approaches to narrative structure and grammar (see e.g. Cohn 2013). Simply stated, 'narrative arc' refers to the chronological construction of plot in a novel or story. We use 'narrative arc', because it emphasises the way a story-line develops over time due to the interactions of individual characters, who make their decisions and act in relation to one another, while embedded within a broader social context that shapes, and is shaped by, their actions. In this sense, 'narrative arc' is a useful framework for reconstructing the changing interdependencies of a couple in 'stages', so that we can assess how a partnership transforms her life-chances over time.

In the semi-structured interviews, we asked our women to give biographical personal accounts of key events and experiences at distinct stages in the life history of their partnership, by focussing on their negotiated exchanges with him. By looking at how our women cognitively evaluated and 'framed'⁹ the key moments in their long-term relationships with Western partners, we reconstructed a general 'narrative arc' for Thai-Western partnerships. Of course, there is no single 'narrative arc' for Thai-Western partnerships, each story is distinct. However, a general 'narrative arc' is a tool for unpacking the important factors that shape specific outcomes, within the range of possibilities that can exist for this form of relationship. It provides an overall framework of distinct 'stages' for comparing similarities and differences between the individual life experiences and perceived 'outcomes' of women, on one side, alongside changing life-course and social conditions that shape their partnership and individual opportunities, on the other.

To be clear, we do not reconstruct a 'narrative arc' for Thai-Westerner partnerships to *reify* this experience into a model of evolutionary 'stages' that leads progressively to a 'happy end'. Our aim is to identify the range and type of decisions, interactions and exchanges between the partners, that shape their increasingly interdependent lives, become socially embedded as a partnership over time, and which can importantly transform a woman's life for better or worse.

We identify six sequential 'stages' of 'her story' within a 'narrative arc' (Table 1). *Her Background*, the first stage is her life story and experiences that shape her as an individual and position her within Thai society prior to partnering. *Motivations and risk-taking to*

Table 1. A 'narrative arc' for Thai-Westerner partnerships (from her side).**Her background**

1. Individual biographical life history

Motivations and risk-taking to partner a Westerner

2. The stimulus – a 'critical juncture' in her life-course
 - structural opportunities always present, but a key life event pushes a woman into risk-taking to partner Westerner as life-strategy
3. Initiating encounters
 - intentional strategies and risk-taking to meet Western man

Precarious ties and dependent connections

4. 'Starting out': establishing bonds
 - early days, when both could quit, but find sufficient in relationship to choose to stay, regular communications and periodic exchanges
5. 'Getting together': building a partnership
 - after first encounters, when relationship is recognised by partners and external community as 'couple', some regular patterns of exchanges

Settling and living everyday together

6. Living together, formalisation, and social embedding of the partnership
 - share a home and spend everyday life together, exchanges are daily routines and relatively formalised (with some degree of legal underpinning, e.g. registered marriage), recognised as a partnership by her natal family, socialise and recognised as a 'couple' where they live

partner a Westerner comprises the second and third stages that refer to the life events that motivate her to choose this strategy and her risk-taking actions to initiate a partnership. As the narrative moves to *Precarious ties and dependent connections*, the fourth and fifth stages are when the loose exchanges of 'starting out' become the more regular ones of 'getting together', but her position in the partnership remains highly dependent and precarious. Finally, in the *Settling and living everyday together* narrative, stage six is reached, when they share everyday living and a 'home' together. This leads to some degree of formalisation and social embedding of the partnership, and new opportunities for her relative empowerment. Through the six stages, the partnership becomes increasingly embedded as a couple, they spend more time and physically live together, their relationship reaches a more established status, both among peers and families, as well as in interdependent access to rights for mobility, shared property, and access to health and welfare services. Some relationships go through all six stages over time, but others remain fixed or literally 'stuck' over a long duration, and relatively permanently, in earlier sequential stages (especially 4 and 5). The speed at which a partnership moves through stages can be months, or many years, and the pace is almost always decided by the man. We focus on the exchanges between a couple, and how her relative dependence in the partnership can shift over time, according to changes in legal, material, emotional, life-course, and family circumstances that they experience, individually, and together as a couple.

Method and sample

The original data is from twenty in-depth semi-structured interviews with Thai women (see Table 2). These were selected from a larger sample of forty interviews. We included only women in partnerships with Western men for at least seven years, so that we can meaningfully study the 'life-cycle' of an enduring relationship. Our interviewees currently reside in Thailand, at least for most of the year. They were recruited primarily from two

Table 2. Sample of Thai women.

<i>Woman code</i>	<i>Current Location</i>	<i>Her Age</i>	<i>Her Highest Educational Level</i>	<i>Divorced from Thai Man?</i>	<i>Children from Thai marriage</i>	<i>Years with Westerner</i>	<i>Registered Marriage with Westerner?</i>	<i>Age Gap to Western man</i>	<i>Children with Western man</i>	<i>Partner's Age</i>	<i>Partner's Nationality</i>
A.	Phetchabun	46	Primary school	Yes	2	12	Yes	22	0	68	Swiss
B.	Udon Thani	47	Vocational college	No	N/A	15	Yes	16	1	63	German
C.	Phetchabun	56	4th grade school	Yes	3	25	Yes	25	0	71 ^c	British (English)
D.	Udon Thani	36	9th grade school	No	N/A	17	No	12	2	48	Austrian
E.	Udon Thani	37	University	No	N/A	12	Yes	20	0	57	British (Scottish)
F.	Udon Thani	53	University	Yes	2	15	No	15	2	68	American (US)
G.	Udon Thani	53	University	Yes	2	17	Yes	13	0	66	German
H.	Udon Thani	52	University	Yes, twice	3 (2 + 1)	12	Yes	10	0	62	American (US)
I.	Udon Thani	37	6th grade school	Yes	2	10	Yes	30	0	67	American (US)
J.	Phetchabun	60	Vocational college	Yes	2	16	Yes	18	0	78	Finnish
K.	Phetchabun	42	University	Yes	4	7	Yes	3	0	45	Dutch
L.	Udon Thani	55	Secondary school	Yes	1	15	Yes	10	0	65	Belgian
M.	Bangkok	32	University	No	N/A	7	Yes	13	0	45	Slovakian
N.	Bangkok	52	University	No	N/A	30	Yes	20	0	72	Dutch
O.	Phetchabun	50	University	No	N/A	10	No	13	0	63	Australian
P.	Udon Thani	34	University	No	N/A	8	Yes	28	2	62	Swedish
Q.	Udon Thani	59	University	Yes, twice ^a	2	14	Yes	15	0	74	German
R.	Udon Thani	57	University	No	0 ^b	16	Yes	15	0	72	German
S.	Pattaya	45	Grade 6 School	No	1	7	Yes	16	0	61	Norwegian
T.	Pattaya	50	Grade 6 School	No	0	9	Yes	—3	0	47	British
	Means	47.7	—	—	—	13.7	—	15.6	—	62.7	—

^aMarried and divorced same man twice.^bCares for nephew who has lived with her since a baby.^cDied aged 71.

rural regions notable for numerous Thai-Western partnerships, Udon Thani (11) and Phetchabun (5), while a few are from the tourist city Pattaya (2), and capital Bangkok (2), to add urban variation. All interviews were conducted between August 2016 and November 2017 by experienced Thai researchers, in Thai language, on location in Thailand. The interviews lasted at least one hour, and some much longer. They were recorded, transcribed and professionally translated into English.

The interviews were open but semi-structured in a way that encouraged respondents to recount key events in their life histories, through which they interpreted and evaluated the evolution of their relationship with a Western man. Interviewers made efforts to gain detailed information on the types of exchanges (intimate/material) between partners, as well as a chronology of the 'story' from her side. In addition, interviewers gathered important factual details, such as, her background, her relationship history, the wealth and dependency of her natal family, her dependent children and their ages, her migration history, her citizenship status, her income, her access to wealth, property and health insurances etc.

Our inductive qualitative approach for working across the cases was inspired by insights from interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).¹⁰ IPA uses qualitative data from semi-structured interviews across similar or relatively homogenous cases. The interview material is often biographical and the analyst's interpretation addresses significant experiences in an individual's life on the basis of her own everyday account:

(T)he accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience ... Data collection is usually (but not necessarily) in the form of semi-structured interviews where an interview schedule is used flexibly and the participant has an important stake in what is covered. Transcripts of interviews are analysed case by case through a systematic, qualitative analysis. This is then turned into a narrative account where the researcher's analytic interpretation is presented in detail and is supported with verbatim extracts from participants. (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009: 3/4)

To analyse the interview material, first, we read the full transcripts several times in detail. From this, we reconstructed the basic 'stages' framework for a 'narrative arc' for a partnership. We then went back and coded the interviews by identifying the type of exchanges between the partners that defined their relationship at each 'stage'. This allowed us to work with the qualitative material on how a woman framed and evaluated her relationship in relation to specific 'stages' in its development over time. We were also able to compare the range of different experiences between respondents within a 'stage'. In this way, we have been able to present the qualitative findings and quotes within the interpretive framework of a 'narrative arc'. This is now presented in our empirical analysis.

A 'narrative arc' for Thai-Westerner partnerships

Her background

1. Individual biographical life history

The life histories of our women demonstrate they are driven and resourceful individuals. All except one were born in a rural poor region in Northeast or Central Thailand. Typically, they have had to cope with rapidly changing and difficult personal, family and work lives. Often, they have experiences of mobility, moving for family, marriage, or work,

across different regions, and of social mobility, moving across class or 'ethnic' boundaries through marriage. In this sense, they have had formative personal experiences that make them open to crossing social boundaries. However, in early mid-life many found themselves 'trapped' and locked within a low social status within Thai society. Often this was a result of a failed marriage that left her with children to provide for in addition to ageing parents and 'dutiful daughter' obligations.

Table 2 summarises characteristics of our women and their partnerships. Typically, a woman is in her early thirties when she starts a partnership with a fifteen years-older Westerner, who at the time is about 50 years old. About half are divorced from Thai husbands and these all have children from their first marriage. So far, their partnerships with foreigners have lasted between seven (minimum requirement for inclusion) and thirty years, and on average fourteen years. All except three cases have resulted in formal marriage. Today the ages of their men range between 45 and 78 (mean 62.7), with one deceased, which underlines the significance of ageing. Although official statistics have limitations as partnerships may not be formally registered, examination of the available data indicates that our sample fits a general pattern.¹¹

Regarding social status and background, it is noteworthy that half of our women are educated to University level. This contradicts popular stereotypes that these women are destitute peasants turned 'bar girls' or prostitutes. We do have cases of former 'bar girls' from poor backgrounds, but several women held middle-class public sector jobs, as teachers and hospital officials. This underlines that the 'cultural script' for marrying a foreigner is open to a wide range of social backgrounds for women originally from rural regions. As well as women who have few other options because of poverty, partnering is increasingly a strategy for single or divorced lower middle-class women in early mid-life, who see their opportunities for upward social mobility 'blocked' in Thai society. For single women in early mid-life opportunities to marry a Thai man are limited, while divorced women with children have even fewer chances on the local marriage market. Marrying a foreigner becomes an aspiration to avoid becoming trapped in a low social status.

I realized that loving a Thai man or having a Thai husband wouldn't help me to have a better life ... The most important point was that Thai men who were my age weren't single. Then, I would only ever be their mistress or concubine. If I was going to fight for the best, I would go for a foreign man. (F)

If she becomes a single parent, and has children to support, this increases her need to earn more, while reducing her opportunities to work conventionally due to child care obligations. If her parents assist in child-rearing, then her responsibilities as a 'dutiful daughter' are amplified.

I had a negative salary and my life was difficult at that time especially that I had to take care of both kids. And my ex-husband wasn't supporting and sending me money. (G)

In one case, a younger (mid-twenties) single University student started online dating with Western men so that she and her parents might have a 'more comfortable life' (E). She is from a relatively privileged background and discusses her decision as an aspirational lifestyle choice. However, this is exceptional. Most women aspire to gain access to resources that are 'blocked' to them in Thai society, due to a combination of life-course, financial and family pressures.

Motivations and risk-taking to partner a Westerner

2. The stimulus – a ‘critical juncture’ in her life-course

Although life-course, financial and family social conditions facing a woman are relatively unfavourable, the decision to try and marry a foreigner is still a radical step. The social and material risks of ‘failure’ are significant. Many women compete for a smaller number of Western men. This can lead to exploitative situations and precarity where men treat women as prostitutes and never keep ‘marriage’ promises. Also, the status of being a woman ‘kept’ by a foreigner carries a stigma in Thai culture, leading to discrimination that can impact negatively on her future work and life opportunities.

When I walk with my husband, and if I don’t tell them that I am a teacher, people think that I’m a prostitute. Thais think that to be a foreign guy’s wife is to be a prostitute. They believe a foreigner’s wife is stupid. I was treated that way, most of the time. This attitude is difficult (to change) among Thais. (F)

So, while the opportunity structure is always open, her decision to partner a Westerner as a strategic goal is usually triggered by a dramatic life-course event. Many women cite acts by a husband that broke their marriages, including infidelity, abuse, alcoholism, his imprisonment for drug-pushing, discrimination by his family, and gambling debts. The significant rupture in a woman’s life-course and drop in social status caused by a husband who takes another woman leads to dramatic responses.

I was in the relationship with a Thai man but he cheated on me with another girl and she got pregnant so I decided to look for a foreigner instead. (B)

For some, their own individual issues, including drug-taking, gambling addictions and significant personal and family debts can be factors, while for others, health issues are a stimulus. One woman had cancer and saw this route as a way to pay for treatment, while another learnt her father has lung cancer and wanted to support him.

Interviewer: If you think back, would you take this husband?

Interviewee: If I didn’t have cancer, I wouldn’t take him. (J)

Look, I had to do something to survive. My first child had disabilities and was being cared for by my uncle. The younger child was with his grandmother. So, I did anything to survive. (A)

3. Initiating the encounters

After taking this life-changing decision, the women engage in a phase of intentional strategies and risk-taking to establish an enduring relationship with a foreign man. In some cases, this occurs literally overnight and she breaks with her existing life pattern and puts herself in a social situation to meet foreign men the day after experiencing the life-course triggering event. In others, women take several years vetting potential candidates by communication and mediated encounters. Meeting foreign men often requires brokering by friends or family acquaintances, who are already married to foreigners, or have relevant contacts. This mediation allows a modicum of security to the woman, who invests trust in her broker, and the bona fide intentions of a prospective man. Some women use internet-dating sites, messaging services and commercial agencies. Others move to work in tourist cities where male tourism and commercial prostitution is prominent or become ‘bar girls’. Risks of violence and exploitation are significant for all.

Many women treat this almost like a part-time ‘job’ and invest a lot of effort to generate encounters that aim to meet his expectations, while testing whether he meets her pre-defined needs.

I lived this life of looking for a foreign husband for a long time ... I took 3–4 hours to write emails back to him, I needed to work hard on them ... I don’t think of foreigners as angels. If I have to spend the rest of my life with someone, I will examine him in as many details as possible. I even observed how he spoke, how he used and threw away toilet paper ... When a foreign man came to Thailand to meet me, I would ask him to spend time with me, and stay at a hotel. And yes, I would sleep with him. There was no moment of holding back because I also wanted to know how he would be when having sex, was he a sadistic person? (F)

Precarious ties and dependent connections

4. ‘Starting out’: establishing bonds

In ‘starting out’, a woman typically invests a lot of time mobilising emotional bonds through regular communications by chat apps and the internet when he is away, while receiving ‘gifts’ and possibly payments in their encounters during his holiday visits to Thailand. Often, she has to please the man and cater to his (sexual, care) intimacy needs, defined on his terms, in a situation of extreme compliance. This is in exchange for sporadic material support, the size of which allows her to gauge his potential long-term viability. At this stage, she has significant incentives to transform their exchanges into regular patterns and an emergent social relationship. This requires significant personal investments of time and resources and has psychological costs. In effect, she is required to construct, replenish and live out his ‘fantasy’ of being in a relationship with a Thai woman on a daily basis. She has to make him find sufficient emotional value to want to stay in a relationship while finding enough material support to make her own life-changes worthwhile. In a sense, both partners assess future prospects based on their distinct individual aspirations.

A man is usually between ten to twenty years older than the woman, and about fifty years old in the ‘starting out’ stage. His age often shapes his demands and their type of relationship at this stage: if he is in middle age, this can be to supply him with prestige, sexual prowess, and status among his Western peers; while if he is older, or retired, it can be for companionship or eldercare services. Women consider his age, demands, and material worth, when deciding whether to proceed. However, choice is extremely circumscribed by the social, material and life-course pressures that led her to choose this path in the first place, while the man has many available partnering options. In effect, she has to accept significant ‘up front’ life changes without any guarantees about future personal or material security. Her scope to say ‘no’ depends on her ability to sustain herself over a period of time in a social status of looking for a foreign man, while perhaps facing pressures from her natal family to ‘make it work’.

It needs stating that some men come across as desperate, unbalanced and unrealistic in their expectations, often experiencing their own ‘mid-life crisis’. Early research on men in relationships with Thai women concluded (Cohen 2001, 321), ‘many ... would be considered misfits in their sedate, middle-class societies. But their very isolation enables them to live out their sexual fantasies in the Orient’. Often men are making a transition from being sex tourists (Thompson, Kitiarsa, and Smutkupt 2016). In presenting herself

as a viable 'significant other' and prospective partner for him, a woman is almost forced to perform a prescribed social role, ranging from sex object to carer, defined by whatever his needs are. For example, one woman, whose future partner was a 57-years-old American 'playboy' who flew in from Saudi Arabia to party with his friends when they met, and thirty years older than her, recounts how she initiated sex on their first date to start the relationship, although he was reluctant:

I would have to get him ... I slept with him on the first date, but it worked. I told him I was too tired to work anymore. I wanted a better life for my parents. I wanted to take care of you. The next morning he gave me a thousand baht to go get my belongings and move in with him. Later he gave my parents ten thousand baht and said he would take care of me. It was that easy. My life changed since that day I decided to sleep with him. (I)

For another woman, a 44 years-old teacher, the social obligations of her professional status made it difficult to try for Western men by dressing and behaving in an openly sexual way. But she had to decide almost immediately on meeting a 62 years old Finnish widow, a retired bus driver with a modest pension, in the presence of a broker (the 'noodle lady'), whether she would enter into what was predefined to be a companion/carer relationship and go to his bed.

Interviewee: I didn't like him at first glance ...

Interviewer: Did the noodle lady tell you what to do?

Interviewee: No, she didn't. If I didn't want him, we would end at the airport. But from the airport, I was asked to make a decision if I would want to go with him. She didn't say I had to sleep with him but it was understood that I had to stay in his room. I decided I would go because I had a life difficulty that time.' (J)

5. *Getting together: building a 'partnership'*

'Getting together' occurs when the specific form of negotiated exchanges between them becomes a structured relationship. The negotiated exchanges remain decisively balanced in his favour. Her trust for him is built up incrementally over time by regular 'gifts', payments of money, sometimes a monthly 'salary', and he may rent an apartment for her. She is expected to provide fidelity in their relationship, and he often checks and enforces forms of social control over her behaviour. When he flies in from abroad for extended holidays, or work breaks, they will live together as a 'couple' sharing a house for that period. Between visits, there is intensive communication by social media and chat apps, that serves to retain their idea of personal intimacy, underpinned by his provision of material support. Over time, usually a few years, if their relationship endures it is recognised as meaningful by both partners, and they are seen as a 'couple' by her family, locals, and their peers in Thai-Westerner partnerships. However, it is important to underline that their partnership remains legally informal. It provides neither enforceable rights, nor future security, for a woman. She exists in a condition of sustained subservient dependency and continues to play out the 'role' allotted by her partner, ranging from 'kept woman' to raise his status and apparent sexual prowess among his peers to servicing his care needs.

For her, this phase is already significantly life-transforming. Often a woman will leave her family home, and her children with her parents, and move into an apartment that he rents to construct the myth that they are a 'couple':

He wanted us to live like a family, cooking and dining together. He came to stay when he was back in the country ... I felt solid with a motorcycle he bought me and monthly financial supports (8000 THB) which got raised from time to time. He took a risk with me too. Thai women with foreigner boyfriends were known for selling anything for cash. He took the chance with me for so long and he decided to rent me a house near the Thai lady who is his friend's wife. (I)

As long as I lived with him, I was at least sure to have an income every month. I had money to pay for my child to go to school and have food every day. (S)

A woman becomes especially dependent, if she stops working to live entirely from his support. Women with jobs that have an official public status, like school teachers, are less likely to do this. Some women take short holiday trips to his country, usually their first experience of international travel to the West. This is a way to test what opportunities long-term life with him might bring, materially, in terms of earning to send home, but also whether daily life with him would be bearable, and whether living abroad is a viable goal, given the relative isolation and social dependency on him it requires.

Emotional feeling, interpersonal trust and mutual recognition can emerge between the partners. However, it is more commonly trust in the patterns and routines of their regular exchanges and roles in the relationship. For her, the regular routines of the partnership provide some limited sense of psychological and material security. Her partner becomes the most important 'significant other' in her life, for sustaining her material wellbeing. She faces substantial social pressures to sustain the relationship, not least from her own family, who invest into 'him' as their primary potential resource to alleviate poverty and support health, eldercare and education needs.

I didn't have anybody. My mother was also sick and he took good care of me financially. I thought he was sincere to me and he transferred me money for lakh (hundred thousand Thai Baht) amount. Whenever he came home he always gave me a huge amount of money. (B)

Aware of it, or not, he becomes the 'significant other' for her parents and children, and because of this, his visits tend to be treated as important family symbolic events, where he is 'welcomed' as a family member. The family are often keen for the partnership to be formalised by marriage and recognised by a ceremony, for which they will demand a 'dowry', while in the meantime he can demonstrate his appreciation, perhaps by paying off their debts. The psychological burden of mediating and trying to realise these demands is significant and falls on the woman. Mostly, women take individual responsibility for risk-taking and personal sacrifices, but their decisions are motivated by what they see as family obligations. A woman recounts how she gave up her job as a hospital official overnight, so that she could visit her prospective partner in Belgium, and transform their relationship into an opportunity to emigrate, but this meant leaving her son behind:

Interviewer: In relation to the decision you made about going aboard, was it 100% made by you only or with your mother and son?

Interviewee: Yes, only me making that decision while my family were my motivations. I had to do this for them.

Interviewer: You wanted to improve their quality of life, so you decided to take risk.

Interviewee: I think most of Thai women feel the same (L)

A woman's life becomes increasingly tied into a dependent relationship. The costs of leaving are too high, socially, because of the stigma of having been in an unmarried relationship to a Westerner, as well as financially. She literally does not have another life to go to, so must make her performative role in this one work. This explains why some women tolerate relatively unrewarding, exploitative and sometimes abusive relationships over years.

Settling and living everyday together

6. Living together, formalisation and social embedding of the partnership

A crucial step that deepens their interpersonal relations and establishes a partnership socially is the decision to live together permanently in the same home. Importantly, this is driven by his perceived needs and on his terms. It usually coincides with a significant transition in his life-course. Several men wanted to live with their partner as part of their decision to retire and settle permanently in Thailand. Others, divorced, widowed, or lonely, offered 'marriage' opportunities as a way to convince her to emigrate and live with them in their homeland. In most cases, she has relatively little agency in the initial decision about 'when' to live together, because it depends on his financial provision of a home to share. However, she often pushes for this step too, because it presents the best opportunity to transform their partnership into long-term tangible assets and security. If achieved, this is a significant return on her deep personal investment. One woman recounts how her partner's ageing and ill health motivated him to move to Thailand, and she recounts their ensuing negotiations of a house, and marriage, in exchange for care-provision.

He wanted to move to Thailand. If he got old and lived in Norway, he would be moved into an elderly home ... he would use the money to buy a house in Thailand, and the house would be under my name. I didn't want to get married to him anymore. If we'd gotten married 5 years ago, I would have been getting money from a pension fund. But, he insisted on marrying me and said that he would buy a house for me and ask me to take care of him in return. (S)

For a woman, her life opportunities are transformed and potentially improved by increasing, first, her relative power in exchanges with her partner, and second, her relative wealth, future security, and status in her family and local society. But it is important to stress that her realisation of such goals depends on the degree to which she is empowered by her access to individual rights, and how well she copes with the transformation of interpersonal relations with her partner that results from living everyday together.

A crucial threshold is when she gains access to increasing individual rights through a formal recognition of her partnership status, primarily, legal marriage registered in Thailand, or her partner's homeland. Formal marriage brings a greater mutual interdependency of the couple legally, but paradoxically, this also provides greater individual autonomy for her. It challenges the status quo and established balance of the partnership that has carried it to this point. Her access to individual rights through the partnership has an important transformative impact on her life opportunities. As we discussed earlier, a woman who emigrates to marry gains rights for international mobility, work and residence abroad, and, as a spouse, potentially access to long-term social welfare, pension, inheritance and health rights. If she naturalises to a Western state, she gains access to

full citizenship, welfare and protections, that hold if she divorces or returns to Thailand. Conversely, a foreign partner can only own property (except in a condominium) in Thailand, if it is registered in her name. In this case, she is the legal owner of the property and he has to trust her not to take possession or sell it. In this way, the decision to build a house and live together, actually transfers material resources to her. Also, there are incentives for a Westerner to register their marriage, so that he enhances his own visa and ownership rights, and gains access to basic medical care, for his prospective life in Thailand. But again, this increases her access to his assets, by inheritance, even in cases of divorce.

Every woman who married saw this as a key transformative moment in her life-course. Most achieved gains in financial security, material wealth, wellbeing and independence through marriage over the long-term, but the degree to which this holds varies considerably.

My life has improved because I have foreign husband. My family was in deep trouble before. But marrying this man has turned by life around. I am living my dream. Before, I had to take wage labour, tending a vegetable plantation, harvesting rice, farming grass. I sacrificed for my own survival and for my children. I was the only daughter in my family. So I am proud to have made good in my life. (A)

It seems like I have won the lottery by marrying him. I believe if you do good, you will get good things in return and vice versa. Without him, I would not be having this life. (R)

Since when I got married to him, my life has changed. I got a house which I never used to have one before. He bought me a car. Then whatever he buys nowadays, and how we are living now is not only for him when he gets old but also for myself. (E)

Of course, rights matter only if they are enforceable. A woman may not know she is entitled to legal protections or can have practical difficulties, if they derive from a foreign nation-state. Some men keep their wives in the dark to maintain her dependency. Others produce legal arrangements to exert control over her access to assets in exchange for fidelity. For example, one woman was required to sign a document forfeiting capital, if she left her husband. Much depends on the specific negotiated agreement at the time of marriage, which is often explicit in the amount of financial and material support, and access to rights and capital, a woman will receive.

The transformative and empowering impact of 'marriage' is perhaps best demonstrated by a case of a woman who has lived with her Austrian partner for 16–17 years, and has two children with him, but remains unmarried because he has not divorced his previous Thai partner. Over the long-term, this has left her in a degrading position of relative destitution and subservience to him, with virtually no enforceable rights or future security. He even exploits her family and denies their children access to his national citizenship. While an extreme case, this demonstrates that without some legal underpinning, partnerships can leave a woman trapped in an abusive relationship over years:

Interviewer: Didn't he give you money at all?

Interviewee: Never. For 16–17 years of living with him, I can't touch his wallet, neither have I known his ATM account number. One day I was sick of him saying everything belongs to him and I couldn't take even a penny from him if we broke up ... I decided to look for new man from the Facebook. He got so furious ... He said I am even (more) worthless than a prostitute ...

He used to say if my dad died, he wouldn't donate a penny for his coffin.

Interviewer: Why did he have such negative thoughts toward your family?

Interviewee: My family borrowed 4000 baht from him because their whole rice farm of 17 Rai was devastated from three-month flood. They were in hard times and couldn't return him money. He kept asking and added on interest from 4000, it became 40,000. I just couldn't forget what he did to my family.' (D)

The transformative impact of naturalising to a Western state through marriage migration is demonstrated by a woman who gained German citizenship, after emigrating to marry her husband. She stayed for seven years and had a daughter with him, before they all returned to Thailand. She explains how German social benefits improved her individual security for life:

You get their social benefits ... if you registered for marriage, you are eligible for their security rights and your future is comfortable. If something happens to him, I get half of his benefits. This is on my part only; my daughter gets her benefits separately ... I am a special citizen for them. If something happens, I just go to the embassy and they will arrange everything for me. (B)

The same woman recounts how the German Courts protected her, when he met a new Thai woman and tried to divorce her by claiming she was unfaithful.

(T)he Court decided that I wasn't wrong. I didn't have a new boyfriend and they didn't have any evidence to prove that accusation ... Before they would deduct half of 15,000 baht (paid by him) but now they are giving more money (laughing). They treated me very fairly and considered me as someone special in their country as I have been married for many years and am eligible for all the rights. (B)

She also recounts how her individual legal empowerment also transformed the balance of their interpersonal relations and changed the way he treated her in everyday life:

He never used to be afraid of me until I won the court case. Now he is also very careful when he speaks something to me ... He was never like this before he used to scold me for whatever I said. I think he must be missing something (laughing) which is why he is very caring now, so I must be careful. (B)

Getting married often coincides with starting to live together on a daily basis. This act of living together permanently in the same home sets in motion radical life transformations for both partners and brings new challenges. It requires a transformation of intimacy and the negotiated exchanges that define their interpersonal relations. Initially, the transformation of an 'extended holiday romance' type relationship, where intimate provision (sexual, emotional and care) by her was exchanged for material goods from him, into everyday living together, is experienced as a significant cultural 'shock' by both partners. The reality of making a 'home' brings out their deep cultural differences, language difficulties, diverse food tastes, and different expectations over interactions with her family. In short, it exposes to a significant degree that they are 'strangers', and that their respective 'roles' performed in 'getting together' cannot be sustained in everyday life.

Their ability to sustain a relationship over the long-term depends on whether they can adapt their respective roles and exchanges to fit the changed circumstances. This requires a transformation of the intimate relations between them that acknowledges a woman's enhanced status in the partnership. Some men find this difficult, not least because the decision to live together was usually motivated by his self-interest or retirement plan,

not to enhance her status and relative power in their relationship. In this respect, much depends on the character of the man, his psychological make-up, his stage in the life-course, his age, and ageing relative to her, and whether he can cope with intercultural living. He needs to adapt to the transformation of her role from one of (sexual) compliance and dependency towards a relatively greater individual autonomy in shaping their everyday life. This is especially the case when they live in Thailand, where she has resources of cultural knowledge and social capital that they need to build a life together. At precisely the point where their partnership becomes socially embedded in a family and locality, and legally underpinned, there is greater potential for conflict in their interpersonal relations, because they are both experiencing significant individual life changes, but with higher stakes, and fewer exit options.

In many cases, the reality of living together exposes the myth of the constructed nature of their earlier intimacy. Importantly, she no longer needs to be fully compliant. In addition, his ageing relative to her, is often an important factor that empowers her within their interpersonal relations because of his increasing ill health or inability to socialise. Their age gap and different stages in the life-course become even more evident as time advances. A woman, thirty years younger than her husband, describes how their personal relations deteriorated when they started living together after marrying when he retired to Thailand:

Past was past, everything was so sweet. It's been almost a decade, everything becomes boring ... It's gone since we got married. The older he gets, the more complaints he makes. He can't keep words to himself. Especially when he is drunk, once it is over he forgets everything he has said ... He wants to divorce me so often that his friends see it as a joke. (I)

In other cases, women relinquish their role of providing him with esteem through sexual intimacy. One woman 22 years younger than her 68 years old Swiss husband, uses his failing sex drive as a basis to demand additional material support. This is a significant shift in power within their intimate and sexual relations, brought on by differential ageing.

My husband was afraid that I will leave him as he cannot fulfil my sex needs. I told him it is ok but it would be good if he can give me more money. He said he can give me only THB30,000 for now, but when after he dies, I can get all of his pension of THB50,000. I am fine now using the prosthetic penis to fulfil my sex drive. (A)

Men who built their hopes by investing romantically can become disillusioned and angry, depressed, or in some cases violent, when their unrealistic expectations are not met. For interpersonal relations to work better over the long-term, it seems that the men need to be more psychologically secure, reliable and trustworthy, that is expressed in their commitment to the partnership. Often, this happens if there was clarity about the limited parameters of the relationship when moving in together, and if their exchanges have few pretensions of romantic 'love', but are more instrumental, defined around her care provision for his material support. Over time such 'commodified' exchanges and relations can become based on trust and involve emotional investments from her side.

One woman in a relationship for 25 years with an Englishman, fifteen years her senior, looked after him in old age until he died aged 71 years. He was relatively poor after going bankrupt, yet after he suffered a stroke she took him into her family house for the last four years of his life. She recounts how her recognition of his role in her own life transformation

meant that she cared for him, and continued doing so, when he was ill and incapacitated, and no longer a source of significant material income.

I was unlike the other ladies who would leave once the money is finished. I was still taking care of him when he was ill and stayed at my house. I did everything for him without feeling disgusted ... Even though he wasn't handsome and (an) old man with nothing, but I loved him with the way he was. The respect was from my heart and was thankful to him. (C)

In cases where a man shows respect to his partner as a 'wife' and buys into a more equal understanding of their interpersonal relation to some degree, she can develop genuine bonds of affection for his role in her life transformation:

What he gives me, is his loyalty ... if he had lots of money but no loyalty I wouldn't be happy ... He knew that I suffered for a long time. He would give anything to me. He fulfills my life. When I got the car, I bowed down on his feet. This is the best thing I've ever had. My life was like a dirty cloth which he picked up to clean. This has changed my life tremendously. He doesn't treat me like a slave. I don't have to take off his shoes or to trim his nails. He treats me as his wife. (F)

In a few cases, genuine mutual 'loving' relationships develop based on equal exchanges in the partnership. In one, a Dutch man became a teacher in her village, adopted her four children, and after 6–7 years, they are genuinely committed to one another in every aspect of their lives. Importantly, their age difference is only three years, they are in the same life stage, and are planning to age together. Asked to describe how her life is better, unlike most others, she does not mention material gains:

It's better from the love he always gives to me. It's like water dripping into a glass. It's always there ... Tremendously. I used to cry every day. When I was with my previous husband 365 days a year, there wasn't a day that I didn't cry. Now that I'm with my husband, I've never cried a single day. (K)

Importantly, a woman's individual transformation does not occur in isolation but is in most cases socially embedded with her natal family obligations. She is often the significant provider for her own children, ageing parents, and other siblings. In many cases, family provision was her primary motivation for the decision to partner a Westerner. Over the life-cycle of her partnership, her role as a 'dutiful daughter' to her family continues to be a factor that shapes her aspirations and decisions in her partnership. In the long-term, she can bear significant individual psychological costs of making sacrifices to provide materially for her family. One woman recounts how partnering fulfilled her life, but expresses deep regret on losing her relationship with her son and her family:

All my dreams have come true. I have everything I want, such as travelling to a few places, wearing what I want, and buying things. I do not wish for anything more ... If I can go back, I may not want to get married again because I miss the happiness from staying with my family and son. I love my son and I felt sorry leaving him to go abroad ... he now understands and accepts ... Yet he was living with his grandma while his father and I were also separated. (L)

In another case, a woman feels she is a target of increasing unrealistic demands from her parents and children. In a sense, her individual life transformation has created a barrier between her and her family. This leads to feelings of distance and isolation from her family and is a significant source of psychological stress and anxiety.

I become the target of complaints in the (parental) house but I just don't get it. Sometimes I feel up to my throat ... I am so stressed. My dad is handicapped and forgets things ... I have to say to my mum that I can take care of dad, but who will be with my husband. You all get money because I take care of my old husband. People say I can become a millionaire from money I get from my husband, if I don't spend it on my family ... (My mother) complains I don't do a daughter's job. (I)

Conclusion

The women's life histories demonstrate a wide range of 'outcomes' in how they think their lives changed. By comparing their interpretations of experiences over stages in the 'narrative arc' of a partnership, we can determine important factors that shape individual life-chances moving from one stage to another. What seems to matter is the degree to which a woman becomes empowered through transformations, in her own life aspirations, in her exchanges with her Western partner, and in her pivotal role in her relations with her own family.

First, a crucial step that enhances a woman's agency relative to her partner and provides a degree of tangible capital assets and future security, is when she gains access to enforceable legal and social rights. All women who achieved an increased formalisation of their partnership through marriage thought that their individual lives had improved substantially by taking this life route. Some sounded almost evangelical when recounting how they had achieved their individual aspirations, as well as providing for their families, and gaining status in Thai society. This contrasted starkly with the case of the woman unmarried after many years, who lives in a situation of precarity, poverty and abuse, and has no future access to tangible assets for her or her children.

A second factor that can relatively empower a woman over time is being significantly younger than her husband. As their partnership advances over years, they enter different stages of the life-course, which transforms their personal relations and the exchanges. His ageing, infirmity, health difficulties and dementia can lead to an increasing dependence on her care provision. When he is dependent on her for eldercare, she is relatively empowered to stand up to him in the household, able to refuse his sexual advances, and make demands for greater material support in exchange for providing care. Of course, much depends on the type of intimate relations and companionship that has built up between them. Many women accept caring for an elderly husband, even when this is unrewarding financially. Others, who have achieved individual security may decide to leave an unhappy and conflictual relationship with an ageing partner. However, divorce is rare, because a woman is already socially embedded in her new life, has aged herself, has relatively few exit options, and may need to wait to inherit assets after his death.

A third factor that influences her relative empowerment is her relationship with own family. In cases where a woman has children from a previous marriage, who live with her ageing parents, who are poor and suffer health problems, then she may face significant demands to provide as a 'dutiful daughter'. This can require emotional and personal sacrifices and sometimes results in feelings of alienation and distance from parents and children. Alternatively, if she has no children, if her parents have died, or her extended family was relatively wealthy, then she will have less people to support and greater autonomy to focus on an individual strategy for transforming

her partnership into a better life. Of course, extended family relations in rural regions are embedded in processes of social change, of which the women's partnerships are only a part. Will the cultural traditions and values, including 'dutiful daughter' obligations, that shaped women in our sample still hold for future generations? Can the women expect reciprocation and 'duties' from their own children, or will their own role in transforming values and expectations towards modern individualism, or even 'Western values', leave them alone in old age?

Finally, a fourth factor that can empower a woman is her human capital and individual resourcefulness. The life-biographies demonstrate a group of individuals who have survived significant personal and structural problems in their life-course. While desperate life situations often led to decisions to partner a Westerner, the ability to make this work over the long-term as a viable life-strategy, despite the high risks, personal sacrifices, and challenging life transformations, shows that these women are strong, resilient, motivated and resourceful individuals. In many cases, their male partners come across as the weaker individual, and often Western 'misfits' (Cohen 2001) who enjoyed their enhanced sexual and financial status in Thailand. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that once they start living together, the woman often starts to exert a strong influence over their exchanges in the home, and over the long-term trajectory of their partnership.

Overall, perhaps our most striking finding is the radical degree to which almost every aspect of a woman's life is transformed. Socio-economic understandings of individual social mobility, hypergamy (marrying up or down), or 'status exchange' theories, do little to capture the scale and depth of her individual life transformation. A woman is literally a different person when she reaches the other side of her personal 'narrative arc'. This fits the idea from film studies that an individual character is transformed to a point of no return through her agency in a 'narrative arc'. In a sense, she steps out of Thai society to try and step up in Thai society. Many women have life-changing experiences, they move and live abroad for several years, speak new languages, wear new clothes, and live in modern houses that tower over traditional ones in the village. They usually start from a weak status in Thai society, then transition to a stigmatised status of 'kept woman' and dependent precarity on a foreigner, before potentially ending up a property owner, with a secure future, and a source of envy and patronage for other Thais. In relation to whom, or by which standards, can we measure her individual social mobility meaningfully? Of course, not all women gain material security and emotional wellbeing, but they still experience radical transitions, that do not refer to the same social categories as their earlier lives.

When I go back to my hometown I don't have many people to talk to. Some of them think that after I got a foreign boyfriend I live in different society and they don't feel comfortable talking to me like before. (T)

This life-trajectory of being a Westerner's wife creates significant challenges for identity and belonging. When asked how to judge if they are 'happy', one woman's response is instructive:

I can't see into their private life, but I judge them from the way they dress, jewellery, a big house, or luxury car. They don't let people know if they may actually suffer at home. They may have to work super hard. No one wants to say that. (I)

Another who spends her life caring for an aged husband recounts:

(I)f you ask me whether or not I love him, no, I don't love him. I just feel pity for him ... I don't like about him is that he has become so dependent on me. I'm the only one in this house who takes care of everything. Every morning he'll call my name even if my hand is still holding his, he calls me right after he's awake. I get bored and want to go out to socialize with people and to relax. People outside may think that I have a good life, but they don't see what happens inside the house. Thai women think that having a foreign boyfriend is good, but it's not what they think it is. (S)

These answers demonstrate that living as a foreigner's wife requires a separation between the public outside face shaped by the need to demonstrate 'success', e.g. through conspicuous consumption, and the inner personal experience of bearing the hidden existential costs and hard work of sustaining this type of life. These women's lives are structured around trying to resolve this 'gap' between public expectations and social pressures that derive from their 'foreigner's wife' status, on one side, and the private inner loneliness of becoming a relative stranger within one's own family, while facing the difficulties of living with an (older) Western man, on the other.

One reason why 'Thai wives' bond together as a distinctive social group is that few others are in a position to understand the contradictions that shape this life path. They are a visible group in Thai society and abroad. Often their friendship bonding is around how to cope and manage with this specific life-trajectory. The women live relatively encapsulated in a social world of relationships that is a clean break from their earlier existence, to which there is no return. Even relationships with their own children and family are transformed beyond recognition, so that they often face significant demands, while forsaking the intimacy of familial bonds. In part, this is due to the existential and physical distances of living everyday to care for a foreign man, who remains in many respects a 'stranger' or 'alien'. Many framed their partnership as a 'job' though a few also cared lovingly for their husband. In cases that became genuine loving partnerships, the men conceded their initial dominance and treated their wives as equal partners, which included inclusion in their material wealth.

Overall, most women consider partnering a Westerner a worthwhile strategy to achieve a better life. However, a compelling finding is that many women, including 'success' stories, experience deep psychological anxieties and feelings of isolation. This is due to pressures they face on a daily basis to mediate and manage between the high competing demands of their family and Western partner. Most women had domestic conflicts with their husbands due to cultural misunderstandings, especially over her obligations to be a 'dutiful daughter', or how to include her children in their partnership. These social pressures and emotional uncertainties accumulate, even for resilient and resourceful individuals. Living this life of 'unintended transnationalism' for many years presents significant challenges for an individual's identity and psychological security.

Notes

1. Among many, see e.g., the agenda-setting contributions in Constable (2005a) and Yang and Lu (2010).

2. Plambeck recently revisited the subjects of 'Love on Delivery' 2007. <http://www.sineplambeck.com/love-on-delivery/> and 'Ticket to Paradise' 2008. <http://www.sineplambeck.com/ticket-to-paradise/> to make a new film documenting their experiences over the last ten years: see 'Heartbound – a Different Kind of Love Story' 2018.
3. Similar features are likely to be apparent in the increasing number of partnerships between Thai women and men from affluent Asian cities and countries. However, this article is limited in scope to Thai-Western partnerships.
4. While acknowledging these structural inequalities, and that many men are transitioning from sex-tourism, it is also true that, at the individual subjective level, some men may be genuinely motivated by good intentions, loneliness, or genuine aspirations to start a family. This article does not speak to, or make judgements about, the men's feelings, motivations or behaviour. We have no data from the men's side and work exclusively from Thai women's accounts of their partners' motivations and behaviour.
5. Among the many, see the important agenda-setting contributions in Constable (2005a).
6. Kim's (2018) study of women marriage immigrants settling in rural South Korea is an exception that includes institutional dimensions, including acquisition of economic, social and political rights in a model for examining relations within households.
7. See, e.g., www.ladyinter.com.
8. Our own data analysis from the Thai 2010 Census and household registrations (available on request) shows that Western men are on average 15 years older than their partners, 60% are 50 years or older, and 35% are 60 years or older. Thompson, Kitiarsa, and Smutkupt (2016) find a similar pattern.
9. A frame is a 'schemata of interpretation' (Goffman 1974, 21) that guides cognitive perceptions of reality.
10. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was developed in psychology but has increasingly been applied within sociological approaches.
11. See footnote 8.

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